

## CHAPTER 6

# HANNIBAL, ROME'S WORST ENEMY

## THE BATTLE FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

“**H**annibal, then about nine years old, was . . . pester-  
ing Hamilcar to take him along to Spain. His father,  
who was sacrificing to the gods before crossing over into  
Spain with his army, led the boy up to the altar and made  
him touch the offerings.”

What would these offerings have been? Hamilcar Barca,  
a powerful North African general, would probably have sac-  
rificed a black dog whose body he had split in two

with his sword, along with a white bull and a  
ewe whose throats he had slit. After killing  
the animals, he would have burned them on

an altar so the gods could enjoy the  
smell of meat roasting in the

flames. Military leaders made  
such sacrifices to persuade

the gods to give them victory  
over their enemies. Livy tells us

that as Hannibal touched the bod-  
ies of the slaughtered animals,

Hamilcar made him “solemnly  
swear . . . that as soon as he was able,

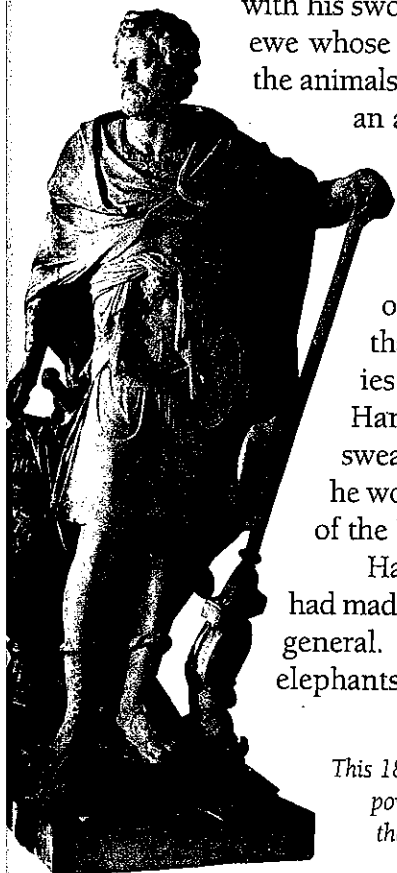
he would become the declared enemy  
of the Roman people.”

Hannibal kept the promise that he  
had made to his father. He became a great  
general. And in 217 BCE, he took war  
elephants from Carthage (in modern

“ LIVY AND  
POLYBIUS

“ Livy, *From the Founding of  
the City*, 25 BCE

“ Livy, *From the Founding of  
the City*, 25 BCE



*This 18th-century statue shows a proud and  
powerful Hannibal, dressed and armed as  
the hero of the Carthaginians.*

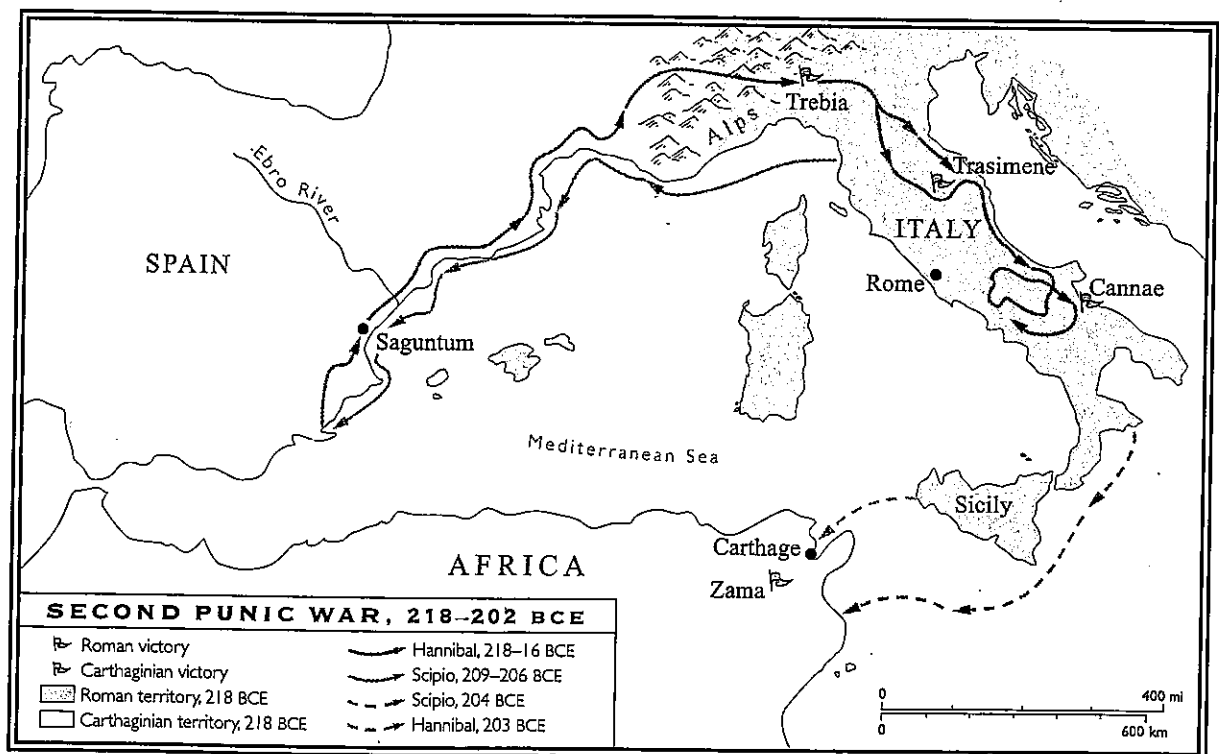
*media + terra =*  
 "middle" + "land"  
 The Romans first called it  
*mare nostrum*, "our sea."  
 Later, they called it the  
 Mediterranean—"in the mid-  
 dle of the land"—because, by  
 then, the Empire completely  
 encircled the sea.

Tunisia), his hometown in North Africa, and marched to the gates of Rome. Rome had never faced a more dangerous enemy in all of its long history.

Who were these Carthaginians who hated the Romans so much? They were seafaring people who left their homeland in Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon) around 800 BCE. They set up colonies in North Africa and Spain, and also on the island of Sicily—the ball that the Italian boot seems to be kicking.

The most powerful Phoenician colony was the North African city of Carthage. It became a busy trading post for merchants from all over the Mediterranean world. In time, Carthage gained independence from its mother country, conquered other Phoenician colonies, and founded colonies of its own. By the 3rd century BCE, this thriving and wealthy city controlled trade across the western Mediterranean.

Like two bullies on the same playground, Rome and Carthage both wanted to be *the* power in the western



Mediterranean world. They both wanted to dominate the fertile island of Sicily and control trade at the Straits of Messina, between Sicily and the Italian mainland. Even before Hannibal's time, the clash between the two cities was brewing. Although both cities were strong and proud, they were very different. Rome's army had already conquered all of Italy. Yet Carthage was wealthier and had a much better navy.

A titanic struggle between Rome and Carthage began in 264 BCE—17 years before Hannibal was born. It started when the Sicilian city of Messina asked Rome to join in its fight against Syracuse, another city in Sicily. Then Syracuse asked Carthage to join in its fight against Messina and Rome. A series of wars raged, on and off, for a century, with these two military alliances fighting against one another. These were called the Punic Wars, from the Latin word for Phoenicia. The enemies fought one another in Italy, Spain, Sicily, and North Africa.

At the beginning of the First Punic War, the Romans had no navy, only trading ships. They didn't even know how to fight on the sea. They only knew how to fight on land, so they invented a grappling machine that made sea battles more like land battles. The machine had huge hooks with heavy ropes attached. The Roman soldier-sailors lobbed the hooks over the side of an enemy ship. The hooks bit into the other ship, holding it while the Romans pulled it up beside their own. With the enemy's ship locked in place, the Romans scrambled aboard and fought hand-to-hand on deck. This technique literally gave the Romans a "fighting chance" at sea.

In 241 BCE, a Roman commander attacked a Carthaginian fleet of 170 ships. Despite stormy seas, Rome sank 50 enemy ships and captured 70 more. What was left of the Carthaginian fleet sailed home, defeated. When the ships arrived in their home port, the commander was executed.

After 23 years of battle, the First Punic War was over. Rome controlled Sicily and dominated the western Mediterranean. The Roman army had broken Carthage's grip. The memory of this shameful defeat tortured Hannibal's father.

## THE PUNIC WARS

### 8th century BCE

Rome and Carthage are  
both founded

### 264–241 BCE

Rome fights Carthage  
in First Punic War

### 220 BCE

Hannibal lays siege to  
Saguntum

### 218 BCE

Rome declares war on  
Carthage again

### 216 BCE

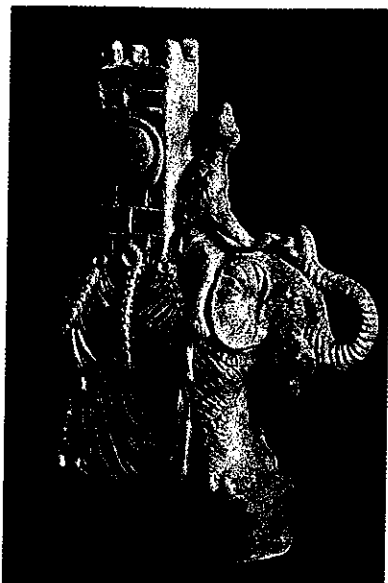
Hannibal defeats the  
Romans at Cannae

### 202 BCE

Scipio Africanus  
defeats Hannibal at  
Zama

### 146 BCE

Scipio's grandson  
completes destruction  
of Carthage



**MIGHTY WAR  
ELEPHANTS**

A full-grown horse weighs, on average, about 1,000 pounds. Male elephants weigh between 9,000 and 14,000 pounds, depending upon the breed. They measure about 12 feet tall, from their shoulders to the ground.

Hannibal's huge, painted elephants astonished everyone who saw them on the long march to Italy. Imagine the terror of the soldiers who faced them in battle.

As part of the peace treaty, Rome demanded that Carthage pay 80 tons of silver—equal to a year's pay for 200,000 Roman soldiers. The city had to find some way to pay this huge bill. Carthage sent its top general, Hamilcar Barca, to Spain. His assignment was to conquer the region and develop the silver and copper mines there. Hamilcar took his son Hannibal to Spain with him, and he did his job well. He sent money and goods back to Carthage.

When Hamilcar died, the 26-year-old Hannibal took over the job. Like his father, Hannibal considered Spain to be his territory. He believed Carthage must be the only power there. So when Rome made an alliance with the Spanish city of Saguntum, Hannibal fought back and fulfilled the promise he had made as a boy: to be the sworn enemy of Rome. He laid siege to Saguntum, cutting off all supplies of food and military aid. After eight months, Saguntum fell to Hannibal's warriors. And in 218 BCE, Rome declared war on Carthage—again. The Second Punic War had begun.

The Romans planned to invade Spain and fight Hannibal there. But Hannibal didn't wait around. He decided to surprise them and invade Italy first. The journey toward Rome took five months, beginning with a long march across France. Then Hannibal led his soldiers through the Alps. He lost one-third of his men during the icy mountain crossing. But still he marched on, with men, horses, and war elephants. These African elephants were decorated for battle and painted in bright colors. (Their trunks were usually red.) Swords were attached to their tusks. Some carried towers on their backs—small fortresses that protected the soldiers riding inside as they shot arrows and hurled stones at their Roman enemies.

The Romans first faced Hannibal's elephants at the Battle of Lake Trebia in northern Italy in 218 BCE. When Hannibal gave the signal, the elephant handlers jabbed the beasts with iron pokers—whips are not enough for elephants—and drove the trumpeting animals forward. Most Italians had never seen an elephant. Their size alone must have been terrifying. The Roman horses—and many

soldiers too—panicked at the sight and smell of these monstrous creatures.

Pressing deeper into Italy, Hannibal showed his cleverness at the Battle of Lake Trasimene, in central Italy, in 217 BCE. Pretending to march against Rome itself, he lured the Romans into a narrow pass and ambushed them from the hills. His troops demolished the Roman army.

A year later, Hannibal conquered the Roman troops again at the Battle of Cannae, in southern Italy, thanks to his powerful cavalry and a brilliant battle plan. Hannibal commanded the soldiers fighting in the center to pretend to retreat—to move back, as if they were losing. The Romans fell for Hannibal's trick and followed. Then the Carthaginians fighting on the flanks closed in on the Romans and surrounded them. The Romans were trapped!

Rome lost nearly 60,000 soldiers. Another 10,000 were captured. Fewer than 6,000 Carthaginians fell in the battle. The Romans had never suffered a worse defeat and they were terrified. Whenever a watchman thought he spotted an army approaching the city, his cry, "*Hannibal ad portas*" ("Hannibal at the gates") would echo through the streets. But the stunning defeat at Cannae became a turning point. More and more men joined the Roman military, and wealthy citizens gave generously to the war effort. The leaders in the Senate decided not to meet Hannibal in fixed battles, but to let him wear himself out in smaller battles in the countryside.

Rome's new battle plan worked. The Carthaginian troops became exhausted. Hannibal's soldiers had been in Italy for more than 10 years, and Carthage refused to send fresh troops. When the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio took charge of the Roman forces in Spain, he cut

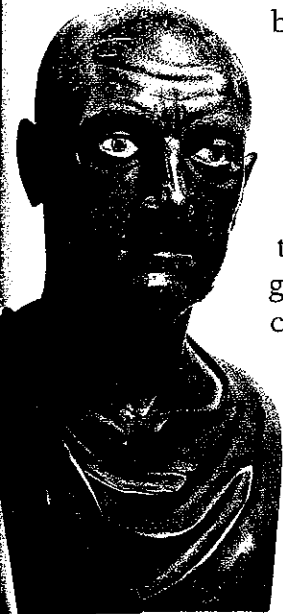
{ *caballus* = "horse"  
Cavalry are soldiers on horseback.

### THE LOST CITY

Despite its one-time glory, historians cannot give us a very full picture of Carthage and its people. This is because the city was completely destroyed in 146 BCE. And there are almost no Carthaginian writings left. Our only sources, other than archaeological finds, are the writings of Carthage's Greek and Roman enemies.

Enemies don't paint flattering pictures. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, writing in the 1st century CE, was shocked by some of the things the Carthaginians did. He wrote that they had slaughtered 500 children on the altar of their chief god, Baal. And in 1976 archaeologists found proof: hundreds of vases with the bones of young children inside.

*Scipio Africanus, sculpted in black marble, has a firmly set jaw, which shows the determination that brought him victory over Hannibal.*



### AS CARLTON HUNTER

The Greek historian Polybius was with the Roman general Scipio when Carthage finally burned to the ground. In his eyewitness account, Polybius wrote that his friend Scipio wept to see such a great and beautiful city destroyed.

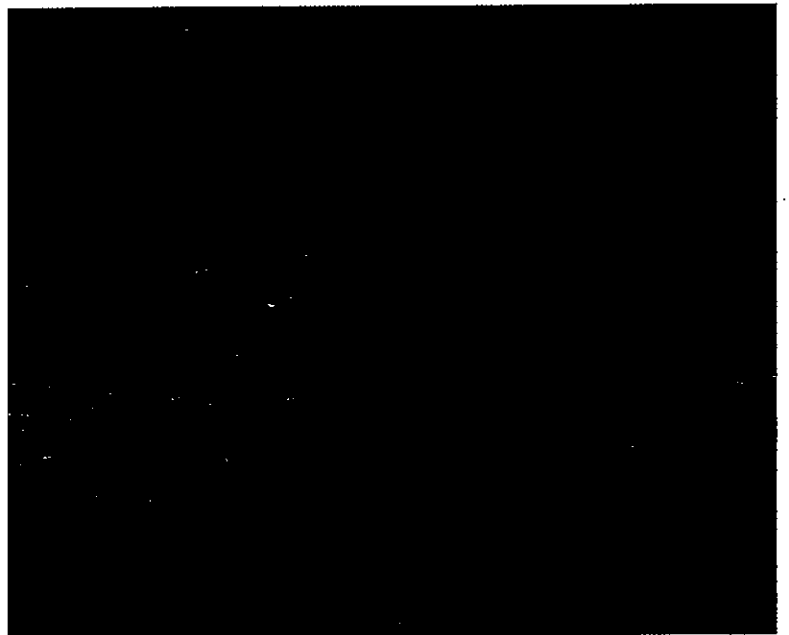
Scipio reflected on the inevitable change which overtakes every city, nation, and kingdom, as it does every one of us men . . . When I asked him boldly what he meant, he grasped my hand and said, "O Polybius, I am terrified that one day someone will give an order to destroy my own city."

off Hannibal's supplies of food and equipment. The Romans finally drove the Carthaginians out of Spain in 206 BCE. Then they invaded North Africa and the town of Zama, to the southwest of Carthage. Hannibal faced Scipio in the fierce Battle of Zama in 202 BCE.

At Zama, Scipio ordered his soldiers to attack Hannibal's frontline elephants with spears and arrows. The elephants panicked and turned back, crashing into the soldiers behind them. Scipio's army killed almost all of the Carthaginians, but Hannibal survived. Under Roman pressure he fled Carthage and spent his last 15 years in exile. In the peace settlement between the two cities, Carthage surrendered all its possessions outside Africa. Rome gave Scipio the honorary title "Africanus," which means "conqueror of Africa."

Carthage never again threatened Rome, but many Romans continued to fear it. In 146 BCE, a half-century after the victory of Scipio Africanus, his grandson's troops finished the destruction of Carthage, Rome's last opponent in the western Mediterranean. Rome had become the dominant power on land and sea. It remained so for more than five hundred years.

Wounded soldiers fall in the midst of fierce combat, and frightened elephants trumpet and retreat in this 16th-century painting of the battle at Zama, in 202 BCE.



### **Questions for "The Battle for the Mediterranean"**

1. Describe the "Phoenicians"; what are some of their characteristics? List at least two things.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Describe the origin of Carthage: what culture were they a part of? How did they become independent?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Why did Rome and Carthage end up fighting?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. At the start of the First Punic War, what problem did the Romans have? How did they fix that problem (with what technology?)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. When Carthage lost the First Punic War, what did Rome make it do? What did Carthage then have to do to deal with their terms of surrender?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Who started the Second Punic War, and where did it start?

**7.** Describe what a war elephant looks like. Now, close your eyes and try to picture what it would be like to fight an elephant. How do you feel?

**8.** How did Hannibal trick the Romans at the Battle of Lake Trasimene?

**9.** Draw an image that shows how Hannibal defeated the Romans at Cannae.

**10.** How long did Hannibal spend in Italy fighting? Why did he end up losing in Italy?

**11.** Where and how did Scipio Africanus finally defeat the Carthaginians?